

50 years of young leaders

Fifty years ago – on May 2, 1960 – the first Rotary Youth Leadership Awards Week began in Brisbane, Qld, a project of the then District 260 (9600).

It may be said that RYLA was a fringe benefit of the Queensland Centenary celebrations held in the previous year, for, to represent her on this important occasion, the Queen had appointed her young and beautiful cousin, Princess Alexandra of Kent; and the organisers of the festivities had asked President-Elect (Sir) Arnold Bennett, of the Rotary Club of Brisbane, for help in arranging a youth program to be called Gundoo (Youth) Week.

The plan was to bring 262 voluntary youth leaders, aged 18 to 25, from all parts of the State to participate in an “educational, social, and cultural experience” attending a number of events with the Princess.

A committee of 22 Rotarians from 11 metropolitan clubs, chaired by Rtn Alex Symonds, General Secretary of the YMCA, arranged an exciting program: a grand ball, a Government House garden party, the opera, theatre, ballet, visits to Parliament, the Courts, Botanic Gardens, industrial and commercial firms. The young people were billeted in the homes of Rotarians.

The Princess expressed her warm approbation. The young participants were delighted. Gundoo week was pronounced a spectacular success and Rotary received considerable praise for its contribution.

So much had the Rotarians enjoyed playing host to these vital young people, and so impressed were they by their leadership activities, that someone suggested an annual Rotary award for youth leaders.

The idea was taken up with enthusiasm. So RYLA was born – formally adopted as a District youth program with Alex Symons as chairman of the District RYLA Committee. Many years later Alex was acknowledged as “Grandfather of RYLA”.

The first RYLA week followed the format of Gundoo Week, but with a one-day forum thrown in to allow for discussion of leadership techniques and concerns. At the request of the awardees, this was extended to a two-day seminar in the following year.

Rotary Club of Newcastle, NSW,



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President Eric Armstrong, learning about RYLA when he visited Brisbane, introduced the program to District 267 (9670), which held its first RYLA seminar – a five-day residential leadership training course with two days of home hosting – in February, 1962.

In 1964, by the same process of extension by sharing information with visiting Rotarians, RYLA was taken into District 270 (9700) by Gordon Boag, of Canowindra, NSW. He led the District committee which mounted the first seminar in 1965. By now it had evolved into a full seven-day residential seminar with a balanced curriculum developed by professional youth workers. And, again by the same sharing process, it was adopted by the Sydney-based District 275 (9750) in 1967.

The first major report of RYLA appeared in this magazine in 1966 and, thereafter, it may be modestly claimed, *Rotary Down Under*, with Founding Editor Paul Henningham leading the way, played a significant part in the rapid growth of this unique youth leadership training program. The subsequent articles by enthusiastic RYLA committee members and even more enthusiastic awardees,

reinforced by favourable reports and strong recommendations from District Governors ensured its adoption in more Districts.

In 1968 representatives of nine District RYLA committees (from Qld, NSW, Vic, WA and NZ) met in Brisbane, at the invitation of District Governor Rod Voller, to share information. Arising from this meeting, the District Governors of the day authorised the formation of an Australia-New Zealand Central RYLA Committee to develop a recommended handbook for the guidance of District committees and seminar leaders; and also to assist in the extension of RYLA.

By 1970 all Australian and New Zealand Districts had adopted RYLA and, at the 1971 Rotary International Convention in Sydney, the President announced that RYLA had been approved as a program of RI.

Today, 50 years after its adoption as a youth activity of one District, RYLA flourishes worldwide and has touched – and even changed – the lives of many thousands of young leaders.

References: Paul Henningham, *Seventy Five Years of Service (1996)*, *Rotary Down Under, March 1966*. ■